

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2827

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AMCONSUL MADRAS

UNCLAS NEW DELHI 9755

E.O. 11652: N/A

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SUBJECT: SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC IN INDIA

1. THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA'S (GOI) LAXITY IN HANDLING THE SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC IN NORTHEASTERN INDIA CAME UNDER HEATED CRITICISM DURING THE OPENING DAY OF PARLIAMENT'S MONSOON SESSION, JULY 22. DURING A LENGTHY, SPIRITED DEBATE, CONGRESS (R), AS WELL AS OPPOSITION POLITICIANS ROSE TO SHARPLY CRITICIZE THE GOVERNMENT FOR FAILING TO CHECK THE GRADUAL SPREAD OF THE SMALLPOX SCOURGE IN RECENT YEARS, PARTICULARLY AMONG RURAL TRIBAL GROUPS WHICH HAVE SUFFERED THE MOST.

2. SPEAKING ON BEHALF OF THE GOI, HEALTH MINISTER KARAN SINGH RESPONDED BY ADMITTING THAT GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE IN COMBATTING THE SMALLPOX EPIDEMIC IN THE PAST HAD INDEED "LEFT MUCH TO BE DESIRED". HE STATED THAT THE TWO CHIEF CAUSES FOR THE EPIDEMIC WERE THE GRADUAL
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ACCUMULATION OF PEOPLE WHO HAVE NOT RECEIVED PRIMARY

VACCINATIONS AND THE SUPERSTITION AGAINST VACCINATION ENTERTAINED BY A LARGE SECTION OF THE RURAL POOR. HEALTH WAS BASICALLY A STATE (AS OPPOSED TO CENTRAL GOVERNMENT) RESPONSIBILITY. MOST STATES, PARTICULARLY IN THE SOUTH, HAD ACTUALLY DONE WELL IN THEIR ANTI-SMALLPOX CAMPAIGNS. BIHAR WAS THE BIGGEST PROBLEM WITH OVER 60 PERCENT OF INDIA'S REPORTED SMALLPOX CASES, AND IT SHARED THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE SPREAD OF THE EPIDEMIC BEYOND ITS BORDERSTO UTTAR PRADESH, WEST BENGAL AND ASSAM.

3. KARAN SINGH MADE FREQUENT REFERENCE TO THE JOINT GOI-WHO ANTI-SMALLPOX CAMPAIGN, WHICH HE CLAIMED HAS LED TO A STEADY DIMINUTION OF REPORTED DEATHS AND CASES OVER THE PAST THREE MONTHS. THE GOVERNMENT NOW HAD SUFFICIENT RESOURCES TO PRESS ITS ATTACK UNTIL "EVERY MAN, WOMAN AND CHILD" IN THE AFFECTED AREAS ARE VACCINATED. IF NECESSARY, THE OBSTACLE OF SUPERSTITION WOULD BE OVERCOME BY LEGISLATION AND FORCE. TOTAL ERADICATION WAS THE ULTIMATE GOAL.

4. ACCORDING TO SINGH, THE LATEST SMALLPOX STATISTICS FOR 1974 PUT THE NUMBER OF CASES AND DEATHS AT 146,000 AND 23,000 RESPECTIVELY.KREISBE

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